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ABSTRACT

In 1970, the City University of New York (CUNY) instituted a controversial open-admissions policy, which permitted the enrollment of large numbers of students in need of basic skills instruction. In 1990, a study was conducted to compare the 1989 freshman cohort at New York City Technical College with the first open-admissions cohort entering the college, and with a cohort of regular students who were admitted before the open-admissions policy was instituted. The study utilized multiple sources of data, including data from the historical literature on the educational backgrounds and academic outcomes of the open-admissions cohort and the pre-open-admissions group, the college records of the 1989 group, and approximately 300 questionnaire responses from the 1989 cohort. Data were gathered on student demographics, educational background, scores on CUNY's standardized assessment examinations in reading, math, and writing, and measures of college performance. Study findings included the following: (1) the open-admissions cohort finished its first year of college with a 1.91 grade point average (GPA) and 16 earned credits, the 1989 sample had a mean GPA of 1.88 with 12 earned credits, while the cohort entering before open admissions ("regular students") finished with a 2.49 GPA and 25 earned credits; (2) the average number of academic courses taken in high school was 9.6 for the 1989 sample and 9.4 for the open-admissions cohort; (3) non-returners comprised 25% of the open-admissions cohort, 24% of the 1989 cohort, and 22% of the regular students; and (4) 80% of the 1989 sample, 43% of the open-admissions cohort, and 40% of the regular cohort were either working or anticipating the need to work during the school year. Based on study findings, it was concluded that educational background and predictors of academic success have remained consistent since the institution of the open-admissions policy. (JMC)

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Open-Admissions: What has Changed in Two Decades at The Community College Level?

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Open-Admissions: What has Changed in Two Decades At the Community College Level?

Abstract

In the twenty years since the City University of New York (CUNY) instituted an open-admissions policy, it was found that educational background and predictors of academic success among a sample of community college Freshman have remained significantly consistent since CUNY embarked on a controversial open-admissions policy in 1970.

Open-Admissions: What has Changed in Two Decades At the Community College Level?

Introduction

The City University of New York historically has been the harbinger of public higher education, as well as a leader in the education of the poor and in the education of the children of New York City's immigrant population. This tradition dates back one hundred and forty-three years and has been instrumental in guiding hundreds of thousands of CUNY graduates out of the grip of poverty (Gorelick, 1981).

CUNY at the undergraduate level, is a university consisting of 12 senior colleges and 5 community-colleges campus system. Prior to 1970 the admissions standard was a high school average of 87 and above to enter the senior colleges, and 75 and above to enter the community-colleges. However, with the civil-rights and other equalitarian movements of the sixties, the City University under pressure to provide greater access to populations heretofore under represented at CUNY, adopted an open-admissions policy in 1970. Therefore, since the Fall of 1970, under this policy, students have been admitted to the senior colleges with high school averages of 80 and above (within academic course work) or those in the top 50 percentile of their high school graduating class. All others with a high school degree have the right of access to the community-colleges. This change in requirements at CUNY became known as the open-admissions policy.

Since the adoption of the open-admissions policy two decades ago, there have been several educational and social factors which have led to the notion of the "Closing American Mind" (Bloom, 1987) perception. Among these factors has been that education within our nation's inner-cities has become increasingly problematic. The New York City system clearly is no exception to this reality. Indeed, because of the size of New York City's public school system, these problems seem enormous. The literature points to a variety of interrelated factors which have contributed to the difficulty of educating inner-city youth over the last two decades. Included is economic impoverishment, poorly educated parents and the affective cultural deprivation, unprecedented violence within the communities and schools, the drug epidemic and the self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

There is a long social-psychological tradition which concludes that such conditions create negative attitudes toward school, diminish educational achievement and contribute to the appallingly high drop-out rate among high school students in our nation's inner-cities. In New York City public school system 55% of the high school student population drop-out. However, the drop-out rate could be as much as 72% for minority populations (Task Force on New York State drop-out Problems, 1986); United States General Accounting Report-Congressional Report, 1987).

Additionally, even among those who are graduated from high school, employment opportunities in New York City are limited because of the rising educational credentials needed for entry

into the desirable labor market. The traditional blue collar job market that was so rich in the early to mid-sixties in New York City has now dwindled to a mere caricature of itself. Therefore, the value of the high school degree has declined. This devaluation has led many high school graduates who normally would not seek a college education because of enrollment in non-academic or vocational high school curricula, to do so now.

Thus, after the implementation of the open-admissions policy, CUNY was faced with large numbers of students in need or perceived to be in need of instruction in the basic skills. By the end of the 1970's, the Freshmen Skills Assessment Program was established on a University-wide basis to assess competencies in writing, mathematics and reading. These examinations are required for all incoming freshmen in order to identify skill deficiencies. The CUNY Freshmen Skills Assessment Test in reading is a 45-item reading comprehension subject of the Descriptive Tests of Language Skills (DTLS) (Educational Testing Service, 1978) (DTLS is also used nationally). The DTLS was specifically designed to identify students who may need special assistance in particular aspects of reading and language use before undertaking standard college level work. In addition to the reading comprehension subtest, the DTLS also includes tests in vocabulary, logical relationships, and usage. The reading comprehension test, however, attained the highest correlation with Freshmen GPA .24 in Fall and .19 in the Spring, in a validity study by Snowman, Leitner, Snyder,and Lockhart (1980).

The CUNY Mathematics Skills Assessment Test is a 40-itemmath and algebra test designed to identify students with math deficiencies so they can be remediated. The mathematics test is a locally constructed test with no national norms (Gerardi, 1990). This exam measures basic mathematical skills in whole numbers, fractions, decimals, percents, ratio and proportion, signed numbers, equations, Pythagorean Theorem, word problems and all forms of algebraic representations.

The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test is a choice of three out of five essay type examination, designed to identify students with deficiencies in writing. This examination was also locally constructed with no national norms. There are eight forms of the CUNY reading exam, four forms of the CUNY math and writing exams, all with various levels of difficulty.

To this date, there has not been a comparison study of the current Freshmen cohort and the first open-admissions cohort. Therefore, the focus of this work will be to ask the following question: has there been a significant decline in the educational outcomes of the student body, at the community-college level since CUNY instituted the open-admissions policy two decades ago?

This effort will employ a multiple data collection method to compare the 1989 Freshmen cohort at New York City Technical College, and the first open-admissions cohort.

Method

A multiple collection of the data was undertaken to compare the 1989 Freshmen cohort at New York City Technical College with

the first open-admissions community-college cohort. This work will include data collected from the historical literature that centers around educational backgrounds, academic outcomes of the open-admissions cohort and the cohort which would have been admitted to CUNY before the open-admissions policy was institutionalized. For comparative purposes, the data were collected from the official college records of this 1989 sample, as well as a questionnaire which was administered to the 1989 Freshmen cohort. The data from the students' college records and the questionnaire was analyzed statistically, by multiple and simple regression method.

Quantitative data: The quantitative data was placed into four categories: 1) demographic measures, which includes the respondent's gender, ethnic background, family income, mother's educational attainment, father's educational attainment, respondent's sources of income, siblings attending or having attended college, and the respondent's reasons for attending college: 2) educational background such as the number of high school academic units taken, high school average, high school average in math and English: 3) scores on CUNY's standardized assessment examinations to include the respondent's CUNY math score, CUNY reading score and CUNY writing score: 4) measures of college performance, which include the respondent's GPA after two semesters, number of college credits earned over the two semester period and the students enrollment or persistence status after two semesters.

Data categories two (2),three (3) and four (4) were extracted from the college's official records. Category one (1) was extracted from a questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered in the Fall of 1989 to 500 freshmen students enrolled in the Freshmen Year Experience courses entitled Academic Access 101.

The instructors administered the questionnaire to their classes (on the first day of classes) at the beginning of the period and the questionnaires were collected after completion. Approximately 300 questionnaires were returned completed. This sample represents approximately 10% of the entering Freshmen class.

Historical Comparative Analysis: For comparison purposes this study used a ten year longitudinal study of the first entering class under open-admissions entitled Right Versus Privilege: The Open Admissions Experiment At The City University of New York (Lavin, Alba & Silberstein, 1981). This work contains a detailed analysis of the first three open-admissions cohort, and the cohort that would have been admitted before CUNY adopted the open-admissions policy. Because this work cites the mean scores for educational background and academic performance outcomes of the 1970, 1971 and 1972 open-admissions cohort, this effort will combine and compute one mean score for each of the areas mentioned above. The combined mean scores for these areas will act as the standard of comparison for this study.

As was mentioned earlier, CUNY did not establish the Freshman Skills Assessment Examination program until the late 1970's, hence Right Versus Privilege does not contain the pass/fail rate for these examinations, nor does it contain the students' parental educational attainment. Therefore, this study also uses a work entitled Socioeconomic Origins and Educational Background of an Entering Class at CUNY (Lavin, Protash, Kramer, Bhouraskar, 1983) which is a two year longitudinal study of the 1980 Freshman Cohort at CUNY, which does contain these data analyses.

Statistical Analysis: Multiple regression analyses were undertaken using the pertinent variables, which had been collected from the 1989 sample's college records and response to the questionnaire.

Although neither of the above mentioned historical studies by Lavin et al. employed regression analysis, this effort will use regression analysis to further enhanced the premise of this study.

Results

Table 1 reveals that the open-admissions cohort finished their first year of college study with a 1.91 GPA and 16 earned credits. The data from the 1989 sample suggests that the mean GPA is 1.88 with 12 earned credits. By comparison, the Freshmen cohort which would have been admitted before the open-admissions policy (defined in this study as regular students) finished the

first year of study with a 2.49 GPA and 25 earned credits.

The average number of academic courses taken in high school for the 1989 sample is 9.6, and 9.4 for the open-admissions community-college cohort, in comparison to 12 high school academic courses taken by the "regular" students.

Twenty-five percent of the open-admissions community-college cohort did not return for the second year. Twenty-four percent of the 1989 cohort did not return for the second year, in comparison to 22% for the "regular" cohort.

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place table 1 about here

Seventy-four percent of the open-admissions cohort, 75% of the "regular" cohort and 91% of the 1989 cohort stated that they were the first to attend college in their family.

Eighty percent of the 1989 sample, 43% of the open-admissions cohort and 40% of the "regular" cohort were either working or anticipating the need to work during the school year. Generally this is a significant factor in the drop-out rate because the family's financial position usually determines the time the student has to spend on school study and work (Lavin, et al. 1981). These data correspond to the mean family income.

The mean family income of the "regular" cohort was $8,327 the 1970 cohort reported $ 7,266, in comparison to the 1989 cohort which reported a mean family income of $12,300. These data suggest that the earning power of the 1989 sample has been

seriously diminished. Such a decline in earning power would mandate that the students from such backgrounds would need to work during the school year.

When asked to give two reasons for attending college, 75% of the open-admissions cohort responded, to earn more money and to get a better job, by comparison 88% of the 1989 cohort responded in this manner (there were no data for the "regular" cohort).

The percentage of the "regular" cohort of black and hispanic enrolled at the community-colleges was 20%, 31% of the open-admissions, and 67% of the 1989 Freshmen cohort was black or hispanic.

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As was mentioned earlier, because the City University did not institute a University-wide standardized testing system until several years after 1970, I will now turn to the 1980 cohort study to compare the standardized mean test scores of the CUNY Freshmen Skills Assessment, as well as to compare parental education of the two groups.

Table 3 reveals that 51% of the 1989 sample failed the CUNY reading examination (during their first attempt at the examination), compared to 56% of the 1980 community-college cohort group; 54% of this sample failed the CUNY math examination (during their first attempt), compared to the 67% of

1980 cohort group and 64% of this sample failed the CUNY writing(during their first attempt) in comparison to 71% of the 1980 cohort.

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place table 3 about here

Forty-two percent of the respondents in the 1989 sample report that their mother's education as some high school or less, in comparison to 55% of the 1980 community college cohort. Twenty-five percent of the 1989 sample reported that their mothers had graduated from high school in comparison to 31% of the 1980 community-college cohort group and 28% of the mothers of the 1989 cohort had some or more of college, in comparison to 20% of the mothers of the 1980 community-college Freshmen cohort. Thirty-four percent of the 1989 sample report their father's education as having some high school or less in comparison to 58% of the 1980 community- college cohort group; 27% of the 1989 sample reported that their fathers had graduated from high school, in comparison to 26% of the 1980 community-college cohort group. Twenty-two percent of the fathers of the 1989 cohort had some or more of college, in comparison to 25% of the 1980 cohort. Because of the large percentage (17%) that did not know their father's education, it is difficult to draw a comparison conclusion.

Forty-nine percent of the 1989 sample had/have sibling(s) enrolled in college, in comparison to 39% of the 1980 community-

college cohort group.

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place table 4 about here

Discussion

This effort attempted a multiple method approach in analyzing the historical comparison of two Freshmen cohorts divided by twenty years.

The first section of this study compared the mean educational outcomes of both groups as an historical analysis. The data from this section seems to s ggest that the education outcomes of the two groups are consistent with one another.

The total number of credits earned was 12 for the first year by the 1989 cohort, however, one third of the open-admissions cohort finished their first year with 12 earned credits (Lavin et al., 1981).

Interestingly, the percentage of basic skill proficiency as tested by the CUNY assessment examination has risen over the last decade in all three tested areas for the 1989 cohort.

In summary, over the 20 years since the institutionalization of the open-admissions policy at CUNY at the community-college level, there has been a consistent level of academic performance outcomes and the predictors of academic success for this sample. This finding becomes more pronounced when viewed from the perceptive of the outcomes of those students who would have been

admitted to the CUNY community-colleges under the admissions policy prior to 1970.

Although these data suggest a widening of the socio-economic chasm between the open-admissions community-college cohort and the 1989 cohort, there seemingly is no predictive correlation of this finding to GPA. However, it is impossible to assess from these data the affective deprivation of poverty on the educational attainment of such student populations. This observation is also consistent with, the much larger and historical research undertaken at CUNY.

Of the many limitations of this study, the sample size was small and restricted to only New York City Tecknical College. By the expansion of this sample to the other community-college populations within the CUNY system, these findings may become further enhanced.

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Table 1

Freshman Cohort Open-admissions/1989

Educational Outcomes Comparisons

	regular	open	1989
	N=15,720		N=300
GPA	2.49	1.91	1.88
TOTALCRT	25	16	12
ACADEMUN	12	9.4	9.6
Return 2nd Year	78%	75%	76%

GPA= academic index after two semesters TOTALCRT= total credits earned over the two semesters, ACADMUN= high school academic units

Table 2

Freshmen Cohort Open-admissions-1989

Socio-economic Comparison

	regular	open	1989
	N=15,720		N=300
1st to attend college	75%	71%	91%
need to work	40%	43%	80%
family income	$8,327	$7,266	$12,300
enrolled in college for better job and to earn more money	-	75%	88%
% black & Hispanic	20%	31%	67%

Table 3

Freshmen Cohort 1980-1989 CUNY Assessment

Examination Comparison of First Attempt Non-proficiency

	1980 N=7,144	1989 N=300
Reading	56%	51%
Math	67%	54%
Writing	71%	64%

Table 4

Freshmen Cohort 1980-1989 Educational Attainment of Students' Family

	1980 N=7,144	1989 N=300
Mothers Education		
some high school or less	55%	42%
graduated high school	31%	25%
some college or more	20%	28%
don't know	-	5%
Fathers Education		
some high school or less	58%	34%
graduated high school	26%	27%
some college or more	25%	22%
don't know	-	17%
siblings attending/attended college	39%	49%

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